A Landscape with Cattle Grazing on a Bank, the Town of Dordrecht Beyond

Aelbert Cuyp | 1620 - Dordrecht - 1690

MASTERPAINTINGS



Aelbert Cuyp

1620 - Dordrecht - 1690 A Landscape with Cattle Grazing on a Bank, the Town of Dordrecht Beyond Oil on panel 40 x 55.4 cm Signed lower right: "Acuÿp" Datable 1653-55

Provenance

- Wilhelm Reinhold Valentiner (1880-1958), curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and subsequently Director of the J. Paul Getty Museum, California, by 1913, from whom acquired by Agnew's, below
- With Agnew's, London, 1919, from whom acquired by Jacques Goudstikker, presumable on behalf of
- Anton Philips, recorded in 1928 as hanging in the salon at De Laak, and by descent
- Sale London (Christie's), 6 December 2007, lot 10, ill.

A note on provenance

The present painting boasts an impeccable provenance, having belonged to the great art historian Wilhelm Valentiner. After passing through the hands of Jacques Goudstikker, one of the most distinguished art dealers and tastemakers of his age, the picture came in possession of Anton Philips in 1919. It remained in his family and was for many decades out of sight of scholars until it surfaced in the Christie's sale of the Philips Collection in 2007.

Cuyp: an artist in wealthy circles

Aelbert Cuyp was one of the greatest landscapists of the Dutch Golden Age. Born into a family of artists, he trained with his versatile father Jacob Gerritsz Cuyp and initially collaborated with him. Aelbert signed his first independent works in 1639. The travels he made in 1652 along the Rhine to Nijmegen, Elten and Cleves gave a fresh impulse to his art. However, Cuyp virtually stopped painting by the time of his marriage in 1659 with the wealthy widow Cornelia Boschman. He had meanwhile acquired considerable status among the Dordrecht elite and spent his time on various administrative positions in the town's public life, such as deacon of the Reformed Church, regent of the Heilige Geest- and Pesthuis ter Grote Kerk and member of the Hoge Vierschaar of Southern Holland in 1679.

Cows: a symbol of prosperity

Cuyp's portraits of proud horsemen attended by servants reflect the artist's elevated social position and the elite circles in which he dwelled. Even Cuyp's iconic landscapes with cattle can be linked to his wealthy patrons.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Dutch agriculture was enormously successful due to improvements in breeding stock, land reclamation and feeding practice and cheese had become the most important Dutch export article of all dairy products. In short, the cow and her milk signified prosperity. The Dutch Republic was fully aware of this and sang its own praises. Maps and city views from the sixteenth century on frequently contain vignettes showing agricultural harvests, fishing, and cattle. Painted city portraits of Delft by Hendrick Vroom (1562/63-1640) and of The Hague by Jan van Goyen (1596-1656) proudly show cattle grazing in meadows before the city.

Cattle played a significant role in national images of patriotism. The cow still is a national symbol and souvenir shops in Amsterdam selling Dutch cheese thankfully exploit this idea.

Cattle: a Dutch theme

Cows are the main motif in this painting. Even today cows grazing in a meadow are a familiar sight in the Netherlands. Car rides on Dutch highways invariably lead through seemingly endless plains of polders dotted with scattered cattle and during summery bicycle tours across the countryside one can frequently admire these herds of cows at close range.

It took a while before cattle developed into an independent subject in Dutch art. Before that, a host of Biblical and allegorical subjects traditionally occasioned the depiction of these animals. Themes such as the Adoration of the Shepherds or depictions of the Seasons or the Months of the Year styled as landscapes as a rule included livestock. In this way the cows as a pictorial motif were already being explored during the sixteenth century. That the depictions of cows entailed a challenge was in fact acknowledged as early as antiquity: the Roman author Pliny (23-79) relates in his wellknown Natural History of the Greek painter Pausias (active in the fourth century before Christ) who had made a specialty of it, sparked a wide following but remained unrivalled.

The prominence of cattle in art would become something uniquely Dutch and cows soon emerged in a range of media and contexts. One early example is Lucas van Leyden's engraving of 1510, of a peasant and a milkmaid with a cow and bull in a landscape (fig. 1). A highly particular tradition is the portrayal of actual prize oxen, which lasted until well into the nineteenth century, one of the earliest being a sizable canvas of 1564, of a prize ox won by Jacop Reyerszoon Boon during a competition for parrot target shooting (fig. 2).

Landscapes formed one of the strongest pictorial traditions featuring cattle. Especially influential was Pieter Bruegel (1526-30-1569) who in 1565 painted his Return of the Herd now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna (fig. 3). Again, this is not a cattle piece proper, but represents the months October and November. Cattle also began to appear during the 1560s in the early kitchen and market scenes by Pieter Aertsen (1508-1575; fig. 4).



1 - Lucas van Leyden, Peasant and Milkmaid with Cows, engraving



2 - Anonymous, Portrait of Prize Ox, won by Jacop Reyerszoon Boon, 1564. AMSTERDAM MUSEUM





3 - Pieter Bruegel, Return of the Herd, 1565. VIENNA, KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM

4 - Pieter Aertsen, Market Scene with Vegetables and Fruit, 1567. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, staatliche museen



5 - Jacob Savery, Winter Landscape, c. 1590-1600. collection countess craven



6 - Roelant Savery, Paradise Scene, c. 1625. maastricht, bonnefanten museum (lent by rce: rijksdienst voor cultureel erfgoed)

Bruegel's example continued to exert its influence until the early seventeenth century, for instance in the works of Jacob (1565-67-1603; fig. 5) and of Roelant Savery (1576-1639), his younger brother. The latter together with Gillis de Hondecoeter (1575-80-1638) laid the foundation for the cattle piece as an independent genre. In their scenes of the Paradise, of Noach and the Ark or Orpheus Playing for the Animals the Biblical and mythological subject is nothing more than a pretext to depict animals (fig. 6). Moreover, they were the first to paint animals in their natural albeit highly stylized surroundings per se, without reference to a literary source or traditional theme. The growing interest in such images is reflected in Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck of 1604, in which some passages are devoted to cattle as a worthy subject for painters.

In the course of the seventeenth century cattle became a stock motif in various genres, from barn scenes to cityscapes, and a quintessential ingredient in the works of the Italianate landscape and genre artists, for instance with Cornelis van Poelenburgh (1594-1667), Pieter van Laer (1599-1642 or later) and Jan Asselijn (1600-16-1652). These artists were the immediate predecessors of Paulus Potter (1625-1654) and Aelbert Cuyp, the greatest masters of the Dutch cattle scene.

Potter's and Cuyp's paintings of cows and oxen of the 1640s and 1650s mark the apotheosis of the genre. Artists such as Van Laer and Asselijn for the first time painted the animals realistically. Cuyp adopted this striking realism while at the same time very subtly idealizing them. He probably was the first who represented cows with a sense of dignity and grandeur while older artists, such as Roelant Savery or even his contemporary Cornelis Saftleven (1607-1681) depicted the animals as caricaturally clumsy and dim-witted. Cuyp, on the contrary, shows cows as individuals and, in this scene, as caring; one of them is tenderly licking another.

7 - Simon de Vlieger, Estuary at Day's End, c. 1643. WASHINGTON, NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Cuyp's Landscape with Cattle Grazing on a Bank

A herd of cows sojourns in a verdant meadow surrounded by shallow hills. An uninterrupted view is offered to a distant horizon punctuated by the tower of Dordrecht's Grote Kerk. A golden afternoon light comes from the left. The cows are sharply set off against magnificent grey cloud formations. Cuyp concentrated on the animals, omitting the herdsman and his dogs. A carefree mood pervades the scene.

Cuyp painted a group of cow paintings in the late 1640s and early 1650s in which he achieves an overwhelming effect of space and monumentality. Having first produced tonal landscapes that echo Van Goyen, Cuyp next followed the lead of Simon de Vlieger (1600-1653) and the foremost Italianate artists, such as Asselijn (1600-10-1652) and Claes Berchem (1621/22-1683). The imposing cloudscape here is reminiscent of De Vlieger's works from the 1640s (fig. 7), while the use of figures in the foreground in combination with a distant panoramic view were inspired by recent works by Asselijn cum suis (fig. 8).

The Cuyp scholar Alan Chong writes in the Christie's catalogue entry about our painting: "The signature is of the type Aelbert Cuyp employed from 1653 to about 1655, and the treatment of the sky is a product of the artist's maturity. Whereas earlier skies consist of swirling masses of dark grey, vigorously applied, the greys in this sky are significantly lighter in tone and more relaxed in impasto. Importantly, the edges of the clouds facing the sun are painted with broken streaks of white, tinged subtly with pink and orange – a characteristic of Cuyp's later work".

All of Cuyp's other comparable cow paintings are earlier. One of his best works, his somewhat larger panel of a River Landscape with Cows in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, is datable to 1648-50 (fig. 9). The gathered cows are silhouetted against the overcast sky executed with deft brushstrokes in an array of greys, whites and yellows. Another masterpiece







8 - Jan Asselijn, Panoramic View, c. 1650-52. vienna, akademie der bildenden künste

9 - Aelbert Cuyp, River Landscape with Cows, c. 1650. washington, national gallery of art



10 - Aelbert Cuyp, Cows Standing in a River, c. 1650. BUDAPEST, SZÉPMÜVÉSZETI MÚZEUM

12 - Aelbert Cuyp, A Herdsman with Five Cows by a River, c. 1650. LONDON, NATIONAL GALLERY





11 - Aelbert Cuyp, Landscape with Herdsmen, c. 1650-52. washington, National GALLERY OF ART

of around c. 1650 in which the human presence, just as in our work, has been pushed back to the distance is Cuyp's crisply painted panel in Budapest (fig. 10). The clouds are again vigorously painted and the scene bathes in a silvery light.

The concept of a close-knit herd of cows in the foreground of an empty and flat landscape, which gives prominence to the sky, evidently appealed to Cuyp. Not all the paintings he created along these lines are as successful as our painting or the two other just-mentioned works, however. In yet another work in Washington (fig. 11) the cows don't interact with each other, while in our cow scene they do, and, in a very engaging way at that. The cows in the National Gallery painting are decidedly too small compared to the human figures, especially the herdsman sitting close to the animals at the extreme right, who, if he would get up would be a giant (fig. 12). Going over all these cow scenes and comparing them with our painting, it seems as if Cuyp had learned from the mistakes he made in some of them. Cuyp's Landscape with Cattle Grazing on a Bank stands at the very end of the development. It is here that Cuyp reached his apogee of sophistication. The lonely sprig of grass in the right foreground that catches is such a brilliant detail that testifies to Cuyp's genius. The sunlight is furthermore cleverly used to define the spatial layout, a quality singled out for praise by the great Romantic artist John Constable in an often-quoted passage: "Chiaroscuro is by no means confined to dark pictures; the works of Cuyp, though generally light, are full of it. It may be defined as that power which creates space".

Our painting is an excellently preserved specimen of Cuyp's most archetypical subject matter. With its lyrical mood and sensitive portrayal of light it shows Cuyp at his very best.





Cuyp and His Place in the Canon of Dutch Art

Today Cuyp enjoys a proverbial reputation worldwide. He already had considerable success during in his lifetime but as he was exclusively active in his native Dordrecht and worked for local patrons his fame only spread later. The heyday of Cuyp's acclaim certainly was in nineteenth-century Britain. Cuyp's sundrenched landscapes enlivened with horses, hunting parties and husbandry appealed to the noble collectors because they impart a distinct aristocratic flavour.

The British taste for Cuyp was nurtured from the 1760s onwards. In 1769 the publisher and printmaker John Boydell (1720-1804) made an etching after Cuyp's enormous sunlit landscape then in the Bute Collection and nowadays in the National Gallery in London. In this publication which also included etchings after other old master paintings the authors singles out for praise the "bright misty rays of the sun, which exactly the character of nature" and Cuyp is compared to great masters such as Claude Lorrain (1604-5-1682). In the same source the British claim to be the discoverers of the master:

"It is astonishing, that the works of so great a master as Cuyp should have been almost totally unknown, or disregarded, till within the last twenty years. That his merit should have been overlooked by his countrymen is not at all surprizing. The boldness of his pencil, and the freedom of his touches were not calculated to please a people who have been accustomed to the exquisite finishings of the most laborious class of artists that the world has produced the attention of collectors of other nations [...] appears incredible [...] It is entirely owing to the taste of the British nation, that his pictures have been retrieved from obscurity, their value enhanced, and places allotted them in some of the first Collections in this kingdom."

Cuyp's breakthrough came still later, during the English Regency era (1795-1837). For instance, it was then that the art dealer Noel Desenfans (1745-1807), whose collection would later form the nucleus of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, acquired his ten paintings by the Dordrecht master. To be sure, not only dealers and collectors became infatuated with Cuyp, artists as well. One of his staunchest admirers probably was the landscape painter Richard Wilson (1713-1782) and in many his works Cuyp's influence is paramount. A host of other British painters were susceptible to the qualities of Cuyp's art, among them the leading landscape artists of the moment such as Thomas Gainsbourough (1727-1788) and John Constable (1776-1837). William Turner (1775-1851) even paid a tribute to Cuyp in a painting that he titled "The Dort Packet-Boat from Rotterdam Becalmed", or "Dort", now in the Yale Center for British Art. The craze for Cuyp in Britain was never equalled in any other country and even now, more works by him reside here than in anywhere else. The British taste for Cuyp in turn generated an interest across the ocean, in the United States. By then, around 1800, no important paintings by Cuyp were left in The Netherlands, a loss that can never be made up for.

Literature

A. Chong, Aelbert Cuyp and the Meaning of Landscape, PhD thesis University of New York 1992, p. 464 (not seen, not attributed)

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